

A COMPLETE STORY EVERY SATURDAY

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SECTION TWO.

HICKORY DICKORY DOCK

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The Story of an Unusual "Triangle" With a Problem That Was Solved
by a Mouse and an Ending That Will Excite Your Imagination

ONE thing the gods will never forget in their careless ministry over the lives of mice and men: Hunger is the supremest passion, and as such it has caused more bloodshed than either love or hate. Some there are who will group love and hate together as spiritual manifestations of hunger. But it is a crass physical yearning after more bread and more cheese that sets bright-clad field marshals astride their white horses and turns national boundaries into vast graveyards, a million crosses, row on row.

Let us begin, then, with a very minor character in our drama—a mouse.

In the lowering dusk of early February a mouse peered round a square tin box, fictitiously labeled "Cake," in the kitchen of a square-shouldered house wherein Turnbuls had flourished and decayed. Like the church mouse of tradition he was thin and scrawny, and the tiny jet beads through which he surveyed his narrow world were bright with famine as he crouched and waited for the superior being whom he hated and upon whom he depended for his crumbs.

Down the creaking stairs she came at last, the withered old woman. The mouse knew her step, and he marked her progress through the gaunt faded hall toward the kitchen table whereon she had set a thick blue plate beside an almost empty bottle and a nicked glass. She was late to-night; the mouse knew that by the intelligence that dwelt in his stomach. But it was not until she had groped her way across the kitchen and reached shakily to turn up the gas that the change in her appearance was visible, even to the mouse's limited powers of observation.

She was dressed, ceremoniously, for an appearance in the great world. Not since the funeral of her sister, Caroline, nearly a year before, had she decked herself so punctiliously in her little black bonnet and the cloak which had been dyed and still showed an undertone of brown. Miss Octavia Turnbull was quite evidently going somewhere; and the shabby traveling-bag which she set beside the oilclothed table indicated that her journey might be far.

The mouse lay in wait. Famine gnawed his little vitals and steeled his heart to a sort of cold ferocity as he lurked in shadows, anticipating her next move. She rolled her black gloves into a neat ball and laid them on the oilcloth before, with the irritating deliberateness of old age, she opened the cake-box and brought out the sum and substance of her evening meal. A box of crackers and a slab of moist yellow cheese.

The mouse glided forth a quarter of an inch, slinking like the beast of prey that he might easily have been. Had he been a larger animal—a lion, perhaps, or a leopard—with what a triumphant growl might he have thrown himself upon the crone who nibbled crumbs between her withered jaws! For the old woman and the mouse hated one another with all the hatred of those who compete for something which seems hardly worth fighting for. Crumbs. Within the memory of mice there had scarcely been sufficient food in that echoing house to support one family of long-tailed robbers. The food supply had dwindled again as the months wore into winter and now something meanly dramatic had come into the old woman's ebbing life.

Out of the long-necked bottle with the label "Currant Wine," written in a hand as shaky as the talons that clasped it, Miss Octavia poured a thin, pinkish trickle into her nicked glass; she drained the bottle, but the liquid fell short of the brim by a full half-inch. Gingerly, then, she sipped the sour comfort between nibbles of crackers and cheese. In appearance she was not unlike her enemy, the mouse. Her ears were round, her face thin and pointed; her eyes were like shoe buttons that had been endowed with a sort of starved intentness.

And as she ate she scattered crumbs. Crumbs! The mouse hitched forward another length. An inviting silence had fallen over the musty kitchen. So intense was the hush that the asthmatic

wheeze of the crooked gas-jet sounded, by contrast, like Niagara's roar. He tensed his muscles for a final leap, then stopped. Her eyes were upon him. How could he know that their filmy stare was fixed in the vacancy of her ancient dream?

"Mercy me!" she was thinking. "The train leaves at six forty-seven. Or is it six forty-nine? I do believe I've lost my time-table. Oughtn't I to stay and see that those people get into the house? She seemed a real lady—but they're Australians. Tut-tut! She had a lovely face. She looked a little like the Crookets of Charlottesville—only she paid her rent in advance. Sixty dollars! I do hope she didn't think I was overcharging them."

"She says her husband's an invalid. Lawdy me! Thank goodness, those nervous diseases aren't catching. I must see Judge Mallok about that. I do hope

he won't forget to collect the rents on the first of the month. Australia! What a place to come from! La! I haven't done a thing about my currant wine. But I'm sure she's a lady and can be trusted, although I don't know any Lefseys who are anybody in the South!"

At that instant the train of her thought was interrupted by a movement under her eyes. A mouse.

"Scat, you little pest!"

Her voice came sharp like the cackle of a startled hen and her eyes snapped venomously as she laid hold of the bottle and brought it down club-like on the space where her enemy had but lately cowered. The bottle cracked itself against empty oil-cloth.

After that she set herself to busily brushing away crumbs. Fussily, minutely she gathered the precious flakes into her thick blue dish, carried them over to the stove and cast them ruth-

lessly into the burning mouth of Meloch. A sizable nugget of golden cheese and a depleted package of crackers she put away in the cake-box and fastened the lid against depredations of robber mice.

From a hole above the wainscoting two little evil eyes peeked out.

NOW Miss Octavia Turnbull, after having the day before exacted a three months' lease, at sixty dollars a month, from the lovely Australian lady with the sad brown eyes, had planned to treat herself to a visit upon her distant and elderly cousin, Mrs. Darius Pennybank of Middleboro. Therefore her heart was all a-flutter that night as she quit the big, shabby house—after having gone the rounds of the gas-jets and seen that the parlor was tidy as she knew how to make it, and at last minced forth oo



HIS ARM SWUNG ROUND AND THE BACK OF HIS HAND STRUCK HER FULL ACROSS THE FACE.